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Senate

Amtrak Funding: FY2006 Budget Resolution

Mr. President, I start today by going back in time to the first time I ever rode a train. I was about 6 or 7 years old, visiting my grandparents in Beaver, WV, a bedroom community outside of Beckley, WV. The fellow who had been the delegate in the West Virginia legislature for Raleigh County, WV, which is where my grandparents lived and where I was born, was ROBERT BYRD. By that time he had left the West Virginia legislature and was serving in the Senate after having served in the House.

The first time I ever rode a train was a B&O Railroad train that stopped in front of my grandparents' house and picked me and my sister up and drove a couple hundred yards on a train of which my grandfather was a crew member.

It is ironic that some 50 years later I stand in the Senate to support the amendment offered by Senator Byrd to support continuing passenger rail service. He is literally from the same place I was born. My first personal experience in riding a train goes back to his old representative district and certainly his Senate district. I say to Senator Byrd, thank you very much for the leadership you have shown for bringing us to the Senate today to express our support for passenger rail service in the 21st century.

Fast forward a little bit to 1970. I was a naval flight officer on my first couple of

tours in Southeast Asia. I remember picking up one day a Newsweek or Time and reading that somebody in the Congress had worked with the Nixon administration to create a passenger rail service for our country. At the time, the private railroads could not make money carrying people. They wanted to be relieved of that responsibility and only carry commodities, not people, from place to place in this country. An agreement was struck whereby if the for-profit private railroads would contribute their old rolling stock, their old locomotives, their old passenger cars, their old dining cars, and old track bed from Washington to Boston, overhead wires and old signaling system, old repair shops and old terminals, and kick in a little bit of money on top of that, we would somehow come up with a new passenger rail service called Amtrak.

After that couple of years and a couple of years of subsidy from the Federal Government, this new entity called Amtrak would start making money, something the private sector cannot do in carrying people. A couple years went by, and after running those old trains on the old tracks, with the old overhead rail wire and the old maintenance shop and the old signalling system and not a whole lot of Federal support to improve the capital infrastructure, Amtrak didn't make money.

If you look across the world at countries where they invest a lot of money in their

passenger rail system, they don't make money either. They don't pay for the full cost of their passenger systems out of the fare box any more than we have been able to do.

Since 1970, passenger rail service, intercity passenger rail service in this country has been starved for capital. Railroads are inherently capital intensive. Passenger rail, as freight rail, needs significant capital investments and we have literally starved Amtrak for capital investments since its creation. And that continues today.

What has changed since 1970? Among the things that have changed, we import a lot more oil today. I don't recall exactly what we were importing as a percentage of consumption in 1970. It was not much. This year almost 60 percent of the oil we use in America will come from places outside the United States.

Our trade deficit in 1970 was not much at all. We were pretty much in balance. In the month of January of this year, our trade deficit reached about \$60 billion in 1 month. Back to 1990, that is twice our trade deficit in 1990, and a quarter of our trade deficit each month and year is attributed to oil imports. One of the things that changed since 1970 is a greater trade deficit and greater dependence on foreign oil.

What else? Congestion on our roads and in our airports. Today, riding down I-95 to catch the train to come down here, bumper-to-bumper traffic. I-95 was a parking lot through Delaware. And that is not the only interstate highway that was a parking lot this morning or this afternoon. The same is true of roads across our country. The same is true of airports across our country.

What else is the difference from 1970? The quality of air is a little bit better. Not as good as it can be and not as good as it would be if we got more people to get out of their cars and take transit.

The other thing that is different, 25 million people rode intercity passenger rail in this country last year. That is not commuters; that is people who rode Amtrak. That is the highest number we have ever seen in the last 35 years.

My friends, if we try to cobble up enough money for Amtrak to live another year and run the old business model we have worked with for a number of years, that is not good enough. We shouldn't do it. I don't know if the administration is serious about trying to force Amtrak into bankruptcy, but I would suggest we go down two tracks. I suggest one track we go down, we adopt the amendment to provide a reasonable amount of money to run the trains in the Northeast corridor and across the country, but also do the necessary work that is needed under a 5-year capital investment plan to fix tracks, fix overhead wires, and fix signaling systems, and be able to run the trains to their capacity and on time.

At the same time we do that, we need to have a debate and a good robust discussion on what the future of passenger rail service should be in this country. I am not sure exactly what the future business model for Amtrak ought to be, but I suggest that it include a couple of these things: One, a focus on providing high-speed passenger rail service in distantly populated corridors, not only in the Northeast corridor from New York to Boston, but densely populated corridors in the Southeast, the west coast, hubs from Chicago. There are corridors we could exploit for passenger rail where folks travel 200 or 300 or 400 miles.

Today, another thing that is different from 1970 is that 75 percent of the people in America live within 50 miles of one of our coasts. Think about that. Seventy-five percent of the people in America today live within 50 miles of one of our coasts. There are all kinds of densely populated quarters that could be well served by intercity passenger rail.

Another aspect of the business model, aside from developing high-speed rail service in densely populated quarters, can be what I call trains that people pay a premium to ride because they like to ride them, because it is a neat thing to do, because it is convenient.

The Auto Train. People get on the Auto Train. They got on it about an hour ago, just south of Washington, DC. They pay a lot of money to ride a train down to Orlando, FL. They have great food on the train, watch movies, sleep on the train. It is a nice train, modern and convenient. They will get off tomorrow morning near Orlando, FL, and have their cars right there with them to go wherever they want to go. There are trains out on the west coast--Pacific Starlight--where people will pay extra money just for the beauty of the ride. Some trains across the great northern part of this country are the same.

Amtrak can make money actually running some of those trains. Amtrak can make money carrying people in a high-speed Acela Express in the Northeast corridor. Amtrak can make money carrying the mail. Amtrak can make money renting the Northeast corridor to freight for their uses, to rent out part of the right-of-way to the folks who want to run other kinds of information through the right-of-way.

Those are some elements of a business plan that I think might make some sense for passenger rail in the 21st century. Freight railroads need to be a part of that. We need to be investing in the freight railroads as well.

The last thing I will say is this. Senator Schumer is here to comment as well. I will finish and add this comment. A friend of mine, a senior official in the Bush administration, said to me a couple years ago, knowing of my interest in passenger rail service, that we should follow the airline model. With passenger rail service, we should do the same kind of model we follow with respect to the airlines. And I said, with tongue in cheek: Does that mean we ought to follow the Pan Am model? Should we follow the Eastern Airlines model? Should we follow Braniff? Should we follow U.S. Air? Should we follow United? Is that the model we should follow into bankruptcy, because they have all gone bankrupt? And now the administration is suggesting a path that will lead to bankruptcy for Amtrak. The Surface Transportation Board, if they were given \$300 million--they can't run the Northeast corridor. That is not their ability. That is not their talent.

This does not make sense. What does make sense is going forward on two tracks. I would suggest we adopt this amendment and we simultaneously have a full and robust and rich debate on this floor and in committees and elsewhere to decide what 21st century passenger rail service ought to be in this Nation.

Last word. In a country where almost 60 percent of the oil we are using in this year comes from other places around the world, where, frankly, a lot of people don't like us, and I am convinced they take our money to hurt us, keep this in mind: To carry 1 ton of

freight by rail from Washington DC, to Boston, MA, uses 1 gallon of diesel fuel. Let me say that again. To carry 1 ton of freight by rail from Washington, DC, to Boston, MA, takes 1 gallon of diesel fuel. In a country that is awash in foreign oil and that has huge trade deficits, a lot of which are attributable to our dependency on foreign oil, we are foolish to ignore that reality.

Mr. President, I yield back my time.